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ABSTRACT

All over the world educators work towards social justice in a variety of classroom projects. How might teachers of English language arts be informed by this variety of projects--all of which involve young people and their teachers exploring relationships between language and power? Theoretically, protagonists of critical literacies have many different origins--coming from feminist standpoints, critical linguistics, poststructuralist theory, anti-racism, the work of Paulo Freire, and more. These theoretical starting points are about shaping young people who can analyze what is going on, who will ask why things are the way they are, who will question who benefits from the way things are, and who can act to make things more equitable. To do so requires a literacy curriculum which has young people engaged in socially perceptive reading, listening, viewing, and speaking, writing and producing texts which represent their rights and the rights of others. This paper discusses some of the fears, questions, and doubts educators may associate with critical literacy. The major part of the paper offers an account from one classroom--the story of how one group of children and their teacher negotiated critical literacies in practice. The paper concludes by making a case for critical literacies in English language arts classrooms at this time--literate practices that go beyond "nice-n-normal"--but it also raises some questions and challenges which accompany such work. (Contains 22 references.) (NKA)

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# Critical Literacies: Negotiating powerful and pleasurable curricula–

## How do we foster critical literacy through English language arts?

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B. Comber

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## Introduction

In a black township school outside Johannesburg teenagers are engaged in a multilingual storytelling project building with local oral traditions and contemporary mass media to contest the political realities of post-Apartheid South Africa (Stein, forthcoming, 2000); one group write about about Mandela, Gatsha and De Klerk and they draw upon traditional African animal folktales to describe the trickery that goes on between the three men; in another long-term Johannesburg project Hilary Janks (1993; forthcoming, 2000) and her colleagues are writing and trialing work-books for and with secondary school students focussing on language, power and identity in everyday, media and school texts; in working class and multi-ethnic east and south London, Chris Searle (Searle and Knobel, 1998) and his middle school students are publishing poetry anthologies and performing plays which tackle the production of poverty and race and class inequalities; from her work in Toronto, Vivian Vasquez (forthcoming, 2000) documents how children in kindergarten can learn to petition for their rights at school; in rural India Urvashi Sahni (forthcoming, 2000) has described how primary school children appropriate the written symbol system to imagine and compose different and optimistic futures; in Portland, Oregon, Bill Bigelow has long investigated the hidden curriculum of public schooling with his high school students; in urban San Francisco, Anne Haas Dyson (1993, 1997) witnesses, narrates and analyses the ways in which young children use their knowledge of popular culture to make social

and academic meanings in the early years of their school lives; in New York, UNICEF educator, Elaine Furniss is working on ways to connect young people in developing countries in on-line chats about their lives, exploitation and change; in suburban South Australia young children are researching an urban renewal project which is changing their everyday landscape; in another school in the northern suburbs of South Australia a group of young people is preparing animated films to combat sexual and racial harassment. I could continue this description and that I believe is valuable, that is, to promote the positive work that educators all over the world do towards social justice, demonstrating how they think globally and act locally (see also Edelsky, 1999; Comber & Simpson, forthcoming 2000; Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997).

Here I want to consider what these projects have in common and how they might inform teachers of English Language Arts? They all involve young people and their teachers exploring relationships between language and power. They disrupt 'taken-for-granted normality' to consider how things might be otherwise. What is being done in these very different situations has some core dynamic principles that are negotiated in local settings, which include teachers and students:

- engaging with local realities
- mobilising students' knowledges and practices
- researching and analysing language practices and their effects
- designing texts with political and social intent and real-world effects

These principles are built around a common ethical and pedagogical standpoints which respects different ways of knowing and speaking. Theoretically, protagonists of critical literacies have many different origins - coming from feminist standpoints, critical linguistics, poststructuralist theory, anti-racism, the work of Paolo Freire, and more. I do not propose to trace these various perspectives here (see Luke forthcoming; Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997). However we can see that such histories indicate a political commitment as well as an educational agenda. These theoretical starting points come with visions of a different world and of particular kinds of young people with specific discursive and ethical resources. They are about shaping young people who can analyse what is going on; who will ask why things are the way they are; who will question who benefits from the ways things are and who can imagine how things might be different and who can act to make things more equitable. To do so requires a literacy curriculum which has young people engaged in socially perceptive reading, listening, viewing and speaking, writing and producing texts which represent their rights and the rights of others. Allan Luke (forthcoming, 2000) has recently explained that critical literacy 'sets out to read backwards from texts to the contexts of their social construction (i.e., economies of text production), and to write forwards from texts to their social use, interpretation and analysis (i.e., economies of text use)'. Surely the development of such literacies would be the goal of most educators?

Yet *critical literacy* as a term inspires suspicion, curiosity, fervour, doubt, uncertainty, distrust, confusion (as well as hope and passion) amongst teachers. It is a loaded term. (After all in the thesaurus alternative words for critical include fault-finding, carping, derogatory, censorious.) Understandably, audiences and readers may anticipate a variety of presentations, content, ideologies in the name of critical literacy. *Critical* in the sense of critical literacy is not I want to argue a negative project in the commonsense use of the term. Rather it relates to critical in the sense of critical theory, critical ethnography, critical sociology – a wider disruptive approach to educational research and theorising. Even where critical enjoys a positive reception, it inspires a mixed band of supporters; there are those who identify with its political project and those who see it as higher order thinking, those who see it as new wave literary analysis; and of course there are those who wonder what it's about and those who see it as a feminist/lefty plot. In this paper I want to do several things. I discuss some of the fears, questions and doubts educators may associate with critical literacy. The major part of the paper will be an elaborated account from one classroom - the story of how one group of children and their teacher negotiated critical literacies in practice. I conclude by making a case for critical literacies in English language arts classrooms at this time – literate practices that go beyond 'nice-'n-normal' – but I also raise some questions and challenges which accompany such work.

**Some myths about critical literacy**

Educators I work with raise a number of questions, fears and doubts about critical literacy including the following:

- won't critical analysis spoil children's fun?
- are you just brainwashing them with your politics?
- isn't it just training in being politically correct?
- doesn't this push the children's interests to the side?
- what if critical literacy makes them cynical or political?
- aren't they too young for this kind of work?
- isn't this just too serious and depressing?

These are serious questions and important to consider. It would be problematic indeed if critical literacy was simply a new program for regulating and alienating young people with a more ideologically sound under-pinning. In addressing these concerns I refer briefly to children's and teachers' work in classrooms where teachers are constructing an overtly socially critical curriculum and you be the judge.

Let's start with the question about whether critical analysis will spoil children's fun. I suspect this fear comes arises in those of us who remember analysing to death various great works of the literacy canon. Many a superb poem, story or novel has been destroyed by zealous English teachers and just as many dreadful texts have been celebrated for generations.

But let's look at several examples of children's work in response to the counter-sexist text by Diana Coles(1983) *The Practical Princess*. The teacher, Jennifer O'Brien asked the children to report on their reading writing and listening in regards to this book and she framed the task, critically:

- Draw and label the sort of father Diana Coles showed the king to be in the novel.
- Draw and label a different sort of father the king could be.
- Draw and label Princess Arete as she is shown to be in the novel. Make sure you show the things she is interested in.
- Draw and label the sort of princess that you usually read about in novels

Figures 1-3 show three different children's responses to this task. What is interesting is that the children are able to capture in their speech bubbles the kind of thing that Diana Cole's king might say and also to imagine him behaving and speaking differently towards his daughter. Stewart's has the king in the novel depicted as saying, "She's yours', in other words giving consent to marry her off. He shows a different response the king might have made, that is, refusing to let the suitor marry the princess. It is interesting to think about our own reading and viewing practices, how often we re-write in our minds the scenes of the movie or the ending of a book. These children have taken up this task as a similar opportunity. Belinda's also picked up the issue of whether the king should marry off his daughter, but she's also added his greed for gold and the way he

speaks to Arete. She writes what he could be saying to his daughter, 'Yes that's good Arete', and 'Good girl'. Robin has neatly summarised the king's character as shown in the novel as, 'Only happy around gold'. Significantly for the interest pictures of princesses as they are usually shown in books, Robin has drawn the full lips and listed the interests as kissing and prettiness. These young children's pictures are dynamic and perceptive. There's nothing boring or depressing about these literate practices. The task has not required a blow-by-blow analysis of the book. It has not spoiled the text which the children have already enjoyed listening to several times. Rather they have been invited to re-read and re-create the characters differently – as they might have been depicted. Their energy for the task is evident in their detailed illustrations and captions.

Before moving on, I'll refer to this task further to consider other questions raised about a critical approach. In this instance the children are examining a counter-sexist text to consider how it has been constructed and how it might be written differently. O'Brien, a feminist teacher, has subjected the feminist text to a critical reading. She invites the children to consider the possibilities for other kinds of kings and fathers. Rather than brainwashing or training in political correctness, O'Brien puts the children in the position where they can examine all texts critically, to think and imagine otherwise. She raises the question of whether this is the only way to re-write tales of princesses, princes and kings and in fact disrupts the politically correct rewriting. In discussion with the children she keeps reminding them that someone, Diana Coles, wrote this book and in so doing

made particular decisions about what to show about particular characters and their activities and what she has the characters saying. Rather than asking specific questions about parts of the text, here she directs children to produce alternative texts based on their reading across the text. And they do this re-interpretation and re-invention in drawing and writing.

Clearly these young children have demonstrated that they are well and truly capable of engaging with these ideas and reading practices. Later I show further examples of young children engaging in equally intellectually and personally demanding curriculum to show that this is not a one-off class with a one-off teacher. O'Brien herself has documented how she incorporated a critical approach in reading children's literature, factual books, and in studying everyday texts (O'Brien, 1994a, 1994b; O'Brien & Comber, forthcoming, 1999).

Critical literacy makes children's *interests* central, because it involved discussing with children how texts work and how they work in the world. It is in children's individual and collective interests to know that texts are questionable, they are put together in particular ways by particular people hoping for particular effects and they have particular consequences for their readers, producers and users. Such an approach does not treat young people as infants, but with respect and expectation. It is child-centred in the sense that it assumes young people's complex productive and analytical capacities for engagement with what really matters; rather than minimising or

restricting them to what is usually considered appropriate or good for children.

**Critical literacies in an early childhood classroom – life literacies and local action**

I am particularly interested in understanding how critical literacies can be negotiated within the institutional location of schooling, so I wanted to understand the work being done by teachers. During a pilot study for a longitudinal project[i] designed to examine the literacies made available to students in low socio-economic communities and those which particular students take up, we[ii] found a group of experienced early childhood teachers already committed to developing critical literacies which made a difference to students' lives. What emerged as we investigated further was a complex relationship between curriculum design, pedagogical processes and locality.

The school is located in an area of high poverty and low employment. Like a number of suburbs in Adelaide it has been the target of a protracted process of 'urban renewal'. During the past few years, the major community centre incorporating the high school had already been closed to account for changes in the ages of the local population. The housing consists mainly of cheap semi-detached brick structures erected after the Second World War. At the time the classroom research was being undertaken the community was involved in negotiations about the demolition of dwellings, the provision of essential services, the redeployment of institutional spaces and so on. Residents include fifties immigrants from the UK

and Europe and recent arrivals from Cambodia, Vietnam and South America. It is a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-generational community. What they have in common in this locality are high levels of poverty.

The early childhood teachers had designed a curriculum unit entitled 'literacy and social power'. It is this unit on which I now wish to focus in considering what critical literacy might look like in an early childhood classroom. To begin the children in several classrooms had discussed, written and drawn about:

- the best things in their lives
- what made them really happy, worried or angry
- what they would wish for if they could have 3 wishes
- what they would change about their neighbourhood, school and world.
- whether they thought young people had the power to change things.

In the grade two/three classroom, the children's products indicated that one of their concerns was the poor condition and low numbers of trees and parks in their local area. It is important to know that in South Australia, the driest state in the driest continent, trees cannot be taken for granted. Indeed the more affluent suburbs are often euphemistically described as the 'leafy suburbs'; the condition and quantity of trees then can be considered as an ad hoc class marker. The teacher re-worked her curriculum so that the children could begin to actively research the issues they had raised in their discussions,

drawing and writing. Fitness, observation, geography, science, reading and writing and maths came together as these young students, led by their teacher, walked their local area with maps and pencils in hand. On copies of local street maps, they recorded the numbers and condition of trees. They extended their field work investigations about trees into broader questions about the local area and called on the experience and knowledge of their families. And their teacher began to systematically gather information from local community organisations. As a result they learned about the urban renewal project and they began to conduct opinion polls with family members and neighbours about issues such as relocation and demolition. With their teacher's help they wrote and sent faxes to local authorities to obtain more information about the plans for their local area.

These children are learning how to conduct research and how to use information and communication genres and technologies in context. Having voiced their concerns about the condition of the trees they went on to research how the problem had eventuated and what could be done about it. They re-designed the local reserve as they would like to see it and sent their labelled diagrams and drawings to the people in charge of the urban renewal project. They investigated the school budget and possible locations for some new plants and researched which trees might be grown in which locations and the benefits and draw-backs of different trees. They invited key personnel from the Council and Urban Renewal Project to the school to speak with the children and respond to their questions. In this instance

students were doing much more than 'voicing an opinion' they were learning to go deeper into an urgent personal, local and school issue. It is worth noting here also that students' written and oral messages were supplemented, or overtaken in some cases, by their visual productions. Using drawing as their preferred mode many of these young learners (many of who were also learning English as a second or third language) were able to make their thoughts very clear. This raises the question of whether literate formats are over privileged in schools to the exclusion of equally powerful and complementary modes and media. New technologies and the take-up of not so new media and modes may offer some children new ways into school literacies.

This integrated and critical curriculum gives attention to the environment, communication, mapping, number work, reading, writing, inquiry-based learning. Learning literacy and numeracy in context has some tangible meaning in this instance. More than that, these forms of knowledge and skills are gained by exploring matters which concern the quality of children's everyday lives. Similar opportunities may present themselves in the everyday school world if teachers are alert and receptive to the questions children pose about why things are the way they are. I have included this particular example of critical literacy under construction to foreground several practices at work in this classroom and to demonstrate how the teacher:

• engages with complex issues of everyday life

- moves into and around the community
- makes available the schools' ICTs for the students' use
- moves from the local to the global and back to the local
- connects with community members and workers
- models critical information location and detection
- takes local action.

Again this is not the only way to approach a critical literacy curriculum; the teacher involved in the above project, regularly works with children's funds of knowledge, including their knowledge of popular culture and the media to build children's understandings that texts (in whatever modes and media) are constructions that could always be crafted differently.

In several projects over a number of years this teacher and her colleagues have been deliberately exploring how they could connect school literacies with home literacies. They began to make use of children's knowledge of film, video, Nintendo, television and their associated promotional materials. For instance they analysed the story structures of films and the mini-dramatic narratives in the packaging of confectionery for children and the associated television advertising (eg the Kinder Surprise™ chocolates). They re-wrote the dramatic episodes, depicted on the TV ads and in the wrappings to re-position the female characters more powerfully. They made use of the cartoon stills from Bart Simpson to re-write the conversations of the major characters, drawing on their analysis of the main characters and what they typically say.

They also experimented with very simple animation based around this familiar character to develop a story sequence. They collectively retold the Adventures of the character Mario (a character from a Nintendo game, which was also made into a movie). The teacher also worked with a book, entitled *Power and Glory* (Rodda, 1994) which uses similar actions sequences as the Mario game. The book was so popular with the children that they decided to write their own game book which they titled *Adventure of the Poison Toad*. The children each drew their version of the main character and then voted on which one would go in the class book. The winning drawing of this character was then photo-copied for all the children to use. The challenge then was to create the text, which like the action games, would be dominated by a sequence of physical action, such as jumping, running, climbing etc (Hill, 1999). They began to generate phrases which would accompany their illustrated pages of the game book, such as 'grab the key', 'sweep the rocks', 'jump the ledge'. The language, rhythm and vocabulary of the video games was appropriated to create the new shared text. Here the teacher worked on children's understandings of how language works, even in terms of verbs, nouns and so on, but it is in the context of familiar territory.

In terms of critical literacy, the teacher is clearly starting with what the children know and asking them to re-view what they understand screen by screen, image by image, phrase by phrase in order to see how such texts are constructed and how they might be constructed differently or how different stories, games and movies might be made.

By starting with the screen characters and story-lines the teacher overcomes any motivational difficulties. She also puts the children into a powerful position, because they know these scripts, these plots, these characters. It is not that she invites the children into a politically correct re-reading of these icons of popular culture, but that she harnesses their pleasure and investment in order to study the language and the screen and to imagine other possible worlds they might construct. Ultimately she is working through the deconstruction of familiar popular screen texts to develop children's discursive repertoires to the point where they design their own texts. In re-locating official school literacies in the unofficial worlds of children's popular culture (material often banned or excluded from school), the teacher reconstitutes children's knowledges and pleasures as resources for schooling and develops what Anne Haas Dyson (1993) has called a 'permeable curriculum', a school curriculum which takes up the knowledges and practices children have acquired in everyday life with their peers, at home, in the community and via the media (see also Dyson, 1997).

**Beyond nice-'n-normal – Risks worth taking?**

I began this paper with brief images of teachers and students negotiating critical literacies in various locations around the globe. I wanted to make two points by doing this – first, that critical literacies are being created in many different places, starting from many different standpoints and drawing on a range of theories and second, that locality is absolutely crucial to what might be negotiated in particular places at particular times. That is, different critical literacies

are being constituted in different places to do different things and with different effects, but it's not just random; for me there are key criteria and they are concerned with young people learning how relations of power work in and through language and how to exercise power in positive and productive ways for their and other people's well-beings. If we believe that literacy involves socially situated practices then we need to think more about the concept – 'situation' – in developing critical literacies. In a critical orientation we particularly need to think about how power and language pertain in a particular situation. If we take the classroom work of Vivian Vasquez or Bill Bigelow – both working with their students on the politics of everyday school life – we can see how they need to be prudent and practical, what James Gee (1993) has called 'socially perceptive' in designing critical literacies which make sense in their contexts? What are the discursive repertoires required for taking social action in particular places which reposition young people as researchers, linguistic detectives, speakers, writers and designers? What are the associated risks of this kind of work and what are the associated risks of not doing this kind of work?

In a number of classrooms where teachers are negotiating a critical curriculum with young people complex situations are arising because teachers and students are moving into unchartered territory. There are no scripts ready made to deal with the issues raised in such classrooms or for dealing with the responses of teacher colleagues who may be less than pleased with students who contest the norms. For instance, when students identify racism and other forms of

gender or sexual harassment within and outside the school, what range of options are available to the teacher for dealing with the dilemmas that arise when children say that they have been harassed by members of the class? Elsewhere I have written about teachers may be literally lost for words (Comber & Kamler, 1997), where they move beyond a shared dialogue with students which Gutierrez and others describe as a 'third space' into a kind of 'no-mans-land', where conversation may necessarily pause.

What happens when the little boys resist changing the existing representations of men and women, boys and girls which privilege existing inequalities or when little girls vote for the status quo that limits their options? These are complex questions, but avoiding them will not make them disappear. To conclude, I finish with some images and words from an elementary school which may give some clues about ways of proceeding around difficult issues. In a north east suburb of Adelaide, Helen Grant, an ESL teacher has worked collaboratively for years with volunteer young people in her school in an Anti-harassment group. For years they have written to the news papers and local councillors, run workshops for teachers and students about countering harassment. As well these powerful social literacies, Helen's interest in media has led her to work with children in animation and film-making. Last year she and another teacher explored what makes things funny in films and television across different cultural productions, starting with the children's knowledge of Bart Simpson. This year Helen has worked increasingly with mainstream teachers and classes, to weave together her interests in

languages and cultures, social action, music, television and film. This year she explored Hilary Jank's work on Top Dogs and Underdogs with a grade 6/7 class. Time is too short to tell you the whole story here. In closing I just want to draw out a few key points. The children spent a great deal of time discussing the concept of top dogs and underdogs in their school. They noticed a connection with lack of status and power and the 'new arrival' children, who did not speak English. They also talked about issues that lead some students to be powerful and popular and other victims or ignored. Working in pairs. and small groups Helen encouraged students to plan and develop short animated films to explore issues of harassment and power. They learnt story-boarding techniques. Many of the films were illustrated and narrated by the children. They used *Media -100* to edit their films and many included sound-tracks from popular music which the children believed had something to say. What is going on here combines children's knowledge of, interest in and expertise in the visual media, tv, film, art, cartoons as well as their interest in contemporary music. As they struggle to make meanings using these multiple media they are working with important material of everyday life. A friend and colleague of mine, Brain Dare argues that we need to start thinking about the grammar of visual images (following Kress, 1995) how they work and how they work on us. He coins the term, 'meanabilities', to explain what critical literacies might be needed now - in other words, in what different media and modes might young people make meaning and make their meanings count. I think there is something in this for English Language Arts teachers. In what ways might young people make meanings with words and images?

Learning to design and produce the texts of our times is the very least children should get from school.

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## Notes

[i] The pilot study "Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Students and the Acquisition of School Literacies" was a collaborative venture between the Poverty and Isolation Team in the Curriculum Services Division of the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and the Language and Literacy Research Centre at the University of South Australia (Comber, Badger, Nixon & Pitt, 1997). The study was conducted in three designated "disadvantaged schools" where the schools had made literacy a high priority and where staff were actively working on changing and improving their practices. Teachers in each school community had reputations for constructing responsive and dynamic literacies and for actively working with their communities. As a result of the pilot study, the university research team is undertaking a three year research project investigating the literacy acquisition of students in low socio-economic communities, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Literacy Program Team, Equity Standards, in the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) beginning in 1998. The research is funded by a grant from DETE and the Australian Research Council (ARC) Strategic Partnership with Industry Research Partners (SPIRT) scheme. For reasons of confidentiality I am not able to name the teachers nor the schools who are involved in this project.

[ii] I thank my colleague Lynne Badger of the University of South Australia for first drawing my attention to this work. Lynne has also written an account of this particular project which will be available later in 1999 from the Commonwealth Literacy Team, DETE, Flinders Street, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001.

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